

Basketball: The power of symbolism in Free-Throw shooting

As a Coach and teacher for some 40 years or so I have learned a few things myself. Learning is a fascinating thing and yet I think some of us take this for granted. "Life" itself is a tremendous journey filled with constant learning, to help us improve our station in life, hopefully make a good respectable living, and survive to the end in every aspect of life. Learning helps us make the decisions that we become accountable for whether right or wrong. The power to 'chose' is probably the greatest power we have in life. Every single thing we do can be traced back to a thought and then a choice which ultimately lead to a destiny. I don't want to philosophize too much here but ultimately this article is about leaving an impact through visual symbols which will possibly last a lifetime.

Charles Garfield once said, "A key to self-management is the capacity for self-observation. It is important to realize that self-observation is not the same as over criticism, judgmentalism, or paralysis by analysis. It is rather a consistent monitoring of one's own performance".

Another reason I am writing about symbolism is that the greatest teacher of all Jesus Christ taught in parables and symbols and if these parables and symbols left long lasting impressions in my mind then I hope it will have some effect on you the reader.

Over the many years of teaching I have found that I have used more and more visuals or symbols to help the students to possibly see what I see. Another teaching tool like an overhead projector projecting a picture on a screen. There's a visual right there. It seems we get on the same page faster.

Here are 4 reasons why I use symbols in my coaching methods.

1. Symbols create visuals which help recall important concepts.
2. Symbols can represent and create feelings we can control.
3. Symbols can teach varying principles according to personal readiness to learn or upgrade.
4. Symbols can possibly expedite learning by clarifying imaginary visuals or pictures.

As I have said before when it comes to shooting free-throws in a superbly consistent and efficient manner it takes more than just 'being a human'. You must become a 'human doing'. Shooters are not born. They are made. So the first key is to find your maximum capacity as a free-throw shooter by learning what your maximum best average is from the line. If the best in the world namely the NBA players average about 72%, you can measure yourself along those numbers which really are very mediocre for a skill that is so simple and repetitive.

William James authored this comment which is perfect for my message. He stated, "A mind once stretched by a great idea or new understanding will never

fully return to its original dimensions". That's why once you hit 90% from the line you won't go back to 70% ever again. You will respect the changes you have made to elevate your numbers through cognitive learning.

Since there are about 25 scientific principles that must be respected when shooting a free-throw or a three-pointer I have found that just about every principle carries some symbolism with it. Don't forget that every principle has some scientific attachment to it and there are few if any shortcuts. Try to defy gravity. Try drinking unleaded gas. These are scientific principles that we all respect whether its through fear or knowledge is irrelevant. The result is the same and that's what we want, positive reinforcement and instant gratification.

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1. **The 'life' of a free throw** which is only about a second or so is symbolic to 'life' itself. The free-throw takes a second and life on the average is about 75 years depending if you are a male or female. Females are more blessed and average a few years more according to scientific studies. To shoot a perfect free-throw you need a goal. IT is the goal. It takes motivation, desire, dedication, knowledge and never ending practice of perfect principles to achieve the desired result which is perfection.
To lead an almost perfect "life" requires the same process. The goal is Heaven or eternal life. (Apologies to atheists and non believers. My intent is not to hurt any ones feelings). Diligently seeking and gaining the appropriate knowledge, application of learned principles, desire to follow a certain predicted path (which can be good or evil), personal motivation, dedication, practicing and applying principles and values that provide the desired result. You tell me if its tougher to master the one second to shoot a free-throw in the game of basketball or the 75 years to master yourself in the game of life?
2. **Hand-ball relationship**. Not only should the hand be placed with the index finger at 90 degrees to the seams (seams are not crucial here but the index finger in the middle of the ball is). Hand should be as wide as possible to get the palm off the ball and it will be easier to maintain a level of consistency with the wide hand.
The symbolism here is that of writing with a pen or pencil. Do you not get your fingers placed the same every single time on the writing utensil and do you not write with the fingers and not the arm and larger muscles of the body? The fingers do the walking. The yellow pages add may ring a bell.
3. **The guide hand**. This is the support hand that stabilizes the ball during the pick up or the catch.
The symbolism here is the visual of the space shuttle ready to blast off into space. Just moments after the rockets have fired up and spewed

megatons of fire and smoke into the ground and atmosphere you see the supporting metal scaffolding slowly peel away to allow blast off.

Same as the left guide hand which after steadying the ball into the 'shot pocket' it peels away a couple inches to allow for the shot to be fired unhindered by it just before pulling the trigger with the right hand. (Opposite for left hand shooters).

4. **The 'shot pocket'** is the area of the body near where the ball comes to rest briefly after picking the ball up just prior to releasing the ball. Depending on the size and strength of the shooter is where the shot pocket may be. It may be near the belly, or the chest or the right side of the face or even behind the top of the head
The symbolism here is cocked trigger, before pressing the trigger.
If there is no pause before you pull the trigger then the shot can be called a 'chuck' or thrust. A shot is disciplined and a 'chuck' or thrust is undisciplined. This pause usually separates males from females simply due to lack of strength.
5. **The shooting arm** includes the part of the anatomy from the shoulder joint to the wrist joint. When you straighten it or 'lock' the elbow during the shot to give the whole arm an appearance of straight, you are actually symbolizing a rifle barrel with the bullet in the chamber just before it is fired.
6. **The follow through** which is the final stage of the shot and is simply the wide open hand starting in a palms up position facing the ceiling (holding the ball) to finished with the wide open hand with palm down facing the floor.
The symbolism here is like the hood of a car being opened and closed.
6. **The wide finger spread before and after the shot** Guarantees consistency in the ball delivery because it limits any excess movement by keeping all finger joints in locked mode. The only joint that bends on the hand during a shot is the wrist.
The symbolism here is like a ducks webbed feet which always stay wide for maximum traction while paddling.
Imagine rowing a boat with a broom handle instead of an oar. Same principle. No direction or power with a thin follow through.
7. **The Shot arc** is usually the same as the angle of release which also equals the angle of entry of the ball in the basket.
The symbolism here for the arc is to imagine shooting out of the top of an old red British phone booth.
You definitely don't want your follow through to be level with your forehead or close to your ear.

7. **The 'complete follow through'** is the holding pattern during the shot at least until the ball hits the rim. This is full arm extended with wrist bent and hand parallel to the floor and no joints bent.

The symbolism here is the Statue of Liberty holding the flaming torch proud and high and for quite a long time. (Hold follow through for life of the shot or till it hits the rim).

8. **The inside edge of the shooting wrist** If you have the perfect shot pocket just a couple inches above the forehead and the inside edge of the shooting wrist will be in line with the front center of the rim.

Symbolism here is the inside edge of the shooting wrist compares to the peep sight on the tip of a rifle or shotgun.

Thus when you have the perfect line you will have the center front of the rim, the inside edge of your shooting wrist and your eyes form a perfectly straight line just like a long rifle barrel.

A good closing statement for all the above symbolism was given by Frank Andrews when he said "Mindfulness is the practice of aiming your attention, moment to moment, in the direction of your purpose. It is called mindfulness because you have to keep your purpose in mind as you watch your attention. Then, whenever you notice that your aim has drifted off, you calmly realign it". Absolutely perfect.

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